

# SOME NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE CEYLON GERBIL, *TATERA CEYLONICA*.

BY

W. W. A. PHILLIPS.

(*With a Plate and a text figure.*)

Singhalese—*Well-miya* (Field-Rat).

Tamil—*Vell 'elli* (White Rat).

## THE CEYLON GERBIL OR SAND RAT (*Tatera ceylonica*).

Judging by Blanford's account (Fauna of British India—Mammalia page 396) the habits of the Ceylon Gerbil seem to differ somewhat from those of its close relatives on the Indian mainland.

The following notes may therefore be of interest; but it must be clearly understood that they apply to the habits of the animal in the Kalutara District only;—as in the drier, and less thickly populated districts of the North, East and South these habits may be modified to some extent.

The Gerbil is found all over the low country, both in the dry and in the wet zones; but does not seem to ascend the hills at all. The highest altitude from which it has, as yet, been recorded, being only about 600 ft. above sea level.

Kalutara is in the wet zone of the West Coast, and the locality where these notes have been made has a rainfall of about 110 inches per annum.

The Gerbil or 'Sand Rat,' as it is usually called locally, is by no means uncommon and, were it not for the Tamil cooly, would be very plentiful. It lives in one of two places—either in a white ant hill or in a burrow in soft sandy soil. In the ant hill it is quite fairly safe as, the soil being so hard, no animal can possibly dig it out and it is only with much labour that the cooly can get at it—either by breaking down the whole hill or by smoking it out. It must, however, be very liable to attacks by snakes—such as the Rat Snake (Dhama) and Cobra—which frequent these places and it is probably for this reason that it prefers to live in the open, in burrows of its own construction. It seems only to retire to the ant hills when driven out of its own burrows and, as far as I am aware, never breeds there. It will often live in an ant hill when constructing a burrow in some convenient spot close at hand—retiring to it during the day and working on the burrow each night—for it is a purely nocturnal animal.

I have never yet found more than one family in an ant hill and it is the exception to find more than one adult in any burrow. The old male will often live by himself, in a burrow of his own, but is sometimes found in an ant hill with a female and one or two well grown young.

The female, when about to give birth, seems always to live quite alone in her own burrow—which may be half a mile or more from any other.

The burrow is dug in soft sandy soil—often in silt which has been washed down and has collected in some hollow or at the foot of a hill. It is practically always right out in the open, quite away from cover of any description—though should there be an ant-hill within twenty or thirty feet, it is a distinct advantage. It is dug some nine inches or so below the ground—rarely descending more than a foot—and is usually quite a simple burrow with two entrances, or exits, and the breeding chamber in the middle; but, it *invariably* has a bolt hole with a



Photo by W. W. A. Phillips.

A YOUNG CEYLON GERBILLE (*Tatera ceylonica*).



